PETRARCH'S PREFACES TO *DE VIRIS ILLUSTRIBUS**

NOTE. In the intellectual history of fourteenth-century Europe there is no figure more complex, ambiguous, and difficult to do justice to than the Italian poet and humanist, Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374). Famous in literary history as the Trecento's finest love poet and as the creator of a particular form of the sonnet, well known in cultural history as an early example of the tortured striving associated with modern secular man, and indispensable to historians of Italian society for his wise and telling appraisals of contemporary events, institutions, and personalities, Petrarch is less well known for his scholarship.[1] While much of his poetry, many of his letters, several of his more personal introspective dialogues, and one of his polemics have received adequate and often graceful English translations and have been subjected to some close literary and structural analysis, there has lately been little discussion of his views on history and his attitudes on the use of evidence. In providing an English translation of Petrarch's two Latin prefaces to his one wholly historical work, a collection of biographies of Roman statesmen and generals, one version of which was posthumously published as *De viris illustribus* (1379), I wish to draw attention to his attitude toward the nature and goal of history. The discussion which follows delineates the main arguments of the prefaces and places them within the total context of Petrarch's thought.[2]

* Other CLASSICS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY published by this journal are: James Fitzjames Stephen, "The Study of History [1861]," *History and Theory*, I (1961), 186-202; Jean Gaulmier, "Volney et ses *Leçons d'Histoire* [1795]," *ibid.*, II (1962), 52-65; *Craig's Rules of Historical Evidence* [1699], *ibid.*, III (1964), *Beiheft* 4; Giovanni Gentile, "Eighteenth-Century Historical Methodology: De Soria's *Institutiones* [1741]," *ibid.*, IV (1965), 315-327; Wilhelm von Humboldt, "On the Historian's Task," *ibid.*, VI (1967), 57-71; Friedrich von Schiller, "The Nature and Value of Universal History: An Inaugural Lecture [1789]," *ibid.*, XI (1972), 321-334.

1. I am well aware that the several articles listed below, as well as some studies not mentioned, do provide considerable material on Petrarch as a scholar. However, there is no recent book-length study on this theme, and Theodore E. Mommsen's monograph on Petrarch's historical and political ideas announced in 1942 was, unhappily, never written. See "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages'" in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. E. F. Rice, Jr. (Ithaca, N.Y., 1959), 106-129, at p. 127, fn. 79.

2. During the past century the two prefaces have been subject to some scholarly discussion and have been translated at least in part into Italian, French, and German. For the long preface of 1351-1353 I have used the text in F. Petrarca, *Prose*, ed. G. Martellotti *et al.* (Milan and Naples, 1955), 218-227 with a faithful Italian translation facing the Latin text. For the short preface, I have used the text in *De viris illustribus*, Vol. I, ed. G. Martellotti (Florence, 1964), 3-5. There is a clear discussion of the argument of the short preface with a German translation of certain passages in Gustav Koerting,

The relative dearth of discussion of Petrarch's views on history is all the more strange since it is well known that, from early manhood, the humanist had included Livy among his favorite authors, and had, throughout his life, been fascinated by the study of antiquity.[3] In fact, it seems certain that Petrarch had conceived a plan to write biographies of ancient Roman leaders (mainly from the republican period) before he had conceived of either of the two other major works, the epic poem *Africa* and the dialogue *Secretum*, which were started in this early period.[4] And one or another version of a series of lives of ancient heroes continued to preoccupy Petrarch's thinking until his death nearly forty years after his first conception of the *De viris illustribus*. Only after Petrarch's death was the entire project completed by the Paduan humanist, Lombardo della Seta.

Petrarch's interest in writing a series of great lives and his concern for historical methods and goals can thus be viewed only as part of his total intellectual development. Here, the genetic approach to understanding Petrarch's thought advocated by Hans Baron is at least partially relevant as are the studies of Guido Martellotti and Carlo Calcaterra.[5] As a result of these studies, we can now discern several plans for the work *De viris illustribus* which correspond in the main to the two versions of the prefaces given below in English translation. The four projects may be given as follows:[6]

ca. 1337	Romulus to Titus, republican Rome plan
1351-1353	Adam to Caesar, "all-ages" plan; with the long preface
1371-1374	Romulus to Trajan, ancient secular heroes; with short preface to Francesco il Vecchio da Carrara
1374	*Compendium* of the "secular-heroes plan"; also completed by Lombardo della Seta, in 1379.

The changes in the plans and revisions, which, in turn, reflect changes in Petrarch's views toward antiquity and the classics generally, are best known from allusions found in the humanist's own writings. His earliest reference to a project for a series of lives derives from the third book of the *Secretum* composed in about 1337, where St. Augustine says to Petrarch: "thus, putting your hand to even greater works, you have tied yourself to a book of histories from the time of king Romulus to the emperor Titus, a task of immense duration and of very great

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Petrarca's Leben und Werke (Leipzig, 1878), 594-600, and a good discussion of Petrarch's goals as an historian with a partial French translation of the long preface in Pierre de Nolhac, *Pétrarque et l'humanisme*, n. ed. (Paris, 1907), II, 5-10. Finally, there is the Trecento Italian version by Donato Albanzani of the short preface and the entire Romulus to Trajan version, together with the Latin text, in F. Petrarca, *De viris illustribus*, ed. L. Razzolini, 2 vols. (Bologna, 1874).

3. On Petrach's early interest in Livy, see Giuseppe Billanovich, "Petrarch and the Textual Tradition of Livy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 14 (1951), 167, 191ff., and B. L. Ullman, "Petrarch's Favorite Books" in *Studies in the Italian Renaissance* (Rome, 1955), 117-137, at 122-123, 125.

4. See Hans Baron, *From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni* (Chicago, 1968), 24.

5. See Baron, *op. cit.*, 2-3, 8-50, and G. Martellotti, "Linee di sviluppo dell'umanesimo petrarchesco," *Studi Petrarcheschi* 2 (1949), 51-80, and Carlo Calcaterra, "La concezione storica del Petrarca" in *Nella selva del Petrarca* (Bologna, 1942), 415-433.

6. These four distinct plans for *De viris* were first distinguished and placed in this order by Calcaterra, *op. cit.*, 418-419, and their relationships have been refined and sharpened by later scholars, especially Baron, *op. cit.*, 23-27.

labor."[7] In the same passage, St. Augustine states that Petrarch moved from these lives to the *Africa*, so the beginning of the composition of the *De viris* can be placed very early in the humanist's career. Petrarch was no doubt influenced by Livy's treatment of the Roman republic as well as by the anecdotal accounts of the first-century historian Valerius Maximus; morevoer, the work — also entitled *De viris illustribus* — of his friend at Avignon, Giovanni Colonna, was probably known to Petrarch.[8]

But this early plan was never fully realized; rather, in the years spent in retreat at Vaucluse immediately following the Black Death of 1348-1349, Petrarch developed a broader plan of his great lives. The project was now to include Biblical figures as well as the great mythical and secular leaders of classical antiquity. In a letter written on May 18, 1349 and addressed to Luca Cristiani, Petrarch reviewed the work that he had been doing at Vaucluse and stated that "no place had afforded me more leisure or more exciting stimulation: that solitude has permitted me to collect in one scheme outstanding men from all lands and from all ages."[9] Early in 1353, Petrarch wrote in the second book of his *Invective contra Medicum* that the figures treated in his version of *De viris illustribus* were "outstanding men drawn from all ages."[10] Hence, during the early 1350s Petrarch was hard at work on his "all-ages" version of *De viris* and about 1351 to 1353 he had sufficiently completed some of the lives to compose the first preface for the reader.

Yet this second plan, too, was never fully realized. Concern for the composition of the epic *Africa* and the major philosophic treatise, *De remediis utriusque fortune*, led the humanist to abandon his historical project for almost the whole of the next two decades. By the time that Petrarch's patron and the lord of Padua, Francesco da Carrara, had asked him to complete a version of *De viris*, the aged humanist was already returning to the more purely Roman classicism of his youth. In his polemic against certain French calumniators of Italy of about 1369, Petrarch had demonstrated his growing militant classicism with the question: "What is all history except the praise of Rome?"[11] Accordingly, the last plan included mainly Roman figures, with both Scipio Africanus and Julius Caesar receiving massive biographies. However, the return to Roman figures in the history did not result in any major change in Petrarch's views on the goal and nature of history. The humanist was content to mine the earlier longer preface for what he must have still considered an essential statement on the purposes of his work. While Petrarch did omit nearly three-fourths of the earlier preface, there was little change in his opinions on the nature of history in the twenty years separating the composition of the two prefaces. So while the structural approach does yield important results on the versions of *De viris* and Petrarch's attitudes toward antiquity and the Christian tradition, the two prefaces also show that he was uncharacteristically constant in his views on the nature of history.

As a reading of the prefaces will show, Petrarch sought in his historical work to fulfill at least three different (and sometimes conflicting) aims, which may be

7. *Secretum*, in *Prose*, 192.

8. On Petrarch's debt to Valerius Maximus, see Nohlac, *Pétrarque*, II, 45, and on his relation to Colonna, see Braxton Ross, "Giovanni Colonna, Historian at Avignon," *Speculum* 45 (1970), 544.

9. *Le Familiari*, ed. V. Rossi, 4 vols. (Florence, 1933-1942), II, 160; Liber 8. 3.

10. *Invective contra Medicum*, ed. P. G. Ricci (Rome, 1950), 45.

11. *Invectiva contra eum qui maledixit Italie* in *Prose*, 790.

denominated as moral, aesthetic, and critical. The moral aim was to provide the reader with examples of right action from past ages. In Petrarch's paraphrase of Livy's famous dictum, the historian was to tell the reader "what to follow and what to flee." The aesthetic aim was bound up with the classical canons of rhetorical discourse; here the historian was to impose unity on his material, infuse his prose with the appropriate dignity of style, and present the whole with elegance and simplicity. The critical aim required the historian to offer a true account of events, to sort out conflicting views, and to present an accurate description of the events themselves. He therefore needed to muster sufficient detail to be able to provide accurate versions of events, and he was called upon to shun all irrelevant, inaccurate, or undignified digressions.

These three aims, which may be presented in the following tabular form, will be given further elaboration against the background of the prefaces and some of Petrarch's statements on history.

AIM	PURPOSE	SOURCE
moral	virtue of the reader	Livy
aesthetic	dignity of style	Valerius Maximus, Cicero
critical	truth	Cicero

From both prefaces it is clear that Petrarch's primary purpose in writing was didactic. In both, he averred that, "in my book, nothing is found except what leads to virtues or to the contrary of virtues." Anything that does not contribute to this goal should be dismissed (according to Petrarch) as aesthetic license, as anecdotes told to amuse the reader. While the examplars to be singled out, of course, varied according to the "all-ages" or more restricted Roman plan of his work, no examples of great leadership were to be drawn from contemporary affairs. In both versions, the need for historical distance and perspective compelled Petrarch to omit current figures and to confine himself to ancient examples of leadership.[12] In his spiritual crisis of the early 1350s, Petrarch found solace in the study and composition of the lives of such Old Testament figures as Job, Jacob, and Joseph, as well as heroes from antiquity. But any discussion of Italian leaders was omitted since they provided, as he asserted in the first preface, "material for satire, not for history." In the second preface, dedicated to an Italian *signore*, Petrarch tactfully removed this condemnation of contemporary Italian leadership.

This exclusive concern with Biblical and Roman lives should not suggest, however, that the lessons of Roman and Old Testament leaders had no contemporary relevance for Petrarch. Rather, he assumed a common human nature for men of all ages so that the study of the lives of great figures (even though long dead) was indeed fruitful for fourteenth-century readers.[13] And if human nature had remained the same, it was at least possible to hope that the long and intimate study of the ancients would result in the reappearance of Roman virtues. Yet in Petrarch's

12. On the notion of perspective and historical distance, see, most fundamentally, Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Stockholm, 1960), 108, and from a somewhat different angle of vision, Marvin B. Becker, "Individualism in the Early Italian Renaissance: Burden and Blessing," *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972), 273-297, at 277-280.

13. On Petrarch's belief in the common quality of human nature, see Franco Simone, "Il Petrarca e la sua concezione ciclica della storia" in *Arte e storia*: *Studi in onore di Leonello Vincenti* (Turin, 1965), 387-428, at 405ff.

view, the decadence of mid-fourteenth-century society was so profound that any program of renewal could only be expressed as wishful thinking. Grimly and sarcastically realistic in his evaluation of contemporary leaders, Petrarch found them lacking both will and ability for greatness. He saw their rare victories on the battlefield as mere luck or as the inevitable result of the even greater incompetence of enemies. His justification of the exclusion of moderns from his lives reflects Petrarch's adherence to the voluntarist tradition: in other words, he saw his task as "describing illustrious men, not lucky ones," depicting events that were willed, not fated, and narrating the lives of men who achieved their greatness through action, not through fortune.[14] By the end of his life, Petrarch had returned to a secular emphasis, so that he omitted the legendary and Biblical figures. Thus, the last version of the lives dealt exclusively with the behavior of men of action.

By the time he wrote the second preface in the early 1370s, Petrarch had come to believe that Roman history provided not only the key to right action, but also the most appropriate subject matter for a dignified historical style. Even in the first preface, Petrarch had explicitly adopted the canons of Roman rhetorical theory as important, though not paramount, in forming the style of his work. While the first aim of history was moral, digressions were permitted when they were pleasing to the reader. Hence, the presentation of the detail that Cicero believed to be central to the historian's concern for completeness was allowed if and when such detail provided pleasant and interesting diversions for the reader. In this instance, Petrarch was trying to balance the first aesthetic canon of simplicity and unity with the historian's account of events. At the same time, another stylistic convention (from Horace's *Ars poetica*) entered in; for the sake of evenness of style Petrarch felt himself free to leave out obscure details and to assume some prior acquaintance with well-known events. In this way, he was able to concentrate on the really outstanding men whose lives, he believed, would elevate the dignity of his discourse and to omit those details which would inevitably reduce the grandeur of his style.

But the principle of selection which Petrarch exercised in his work was not wholly, or even primarily, aesthetic; it was, instead, critical, rational, and scholarly. As a critical historian, Petrarch felt called upon to collect the best descriptions of individual lives from many different works and to present them as a truthful and, if possible, elegant whole. Thus, he perceived the dual goal of relieving the reader of the bother of research and of providing him with a realistic account. The novelty, however, of Petrarch's goal consisted not so much in this service to the reader as in the criteria of selection, the verisimilitude of the account or the authority of the writer, which he adduced for evaluation of sources. While establishing these two principles of selection, Petrarch was clearly relying upon two different and possibly conflicting critical tools — common sense and tradition. Nowhere does he state explicitly which authors are to be preferred to others (though one suspects that Livy is to be given first place among Roman historians), nor does he spell out just how to handle apparently supernatural or miraculous events, even though such events played a large role in some of the lives of the "all-ages" version.

14. On Petrarch's close relation to the voluntaristic-rhetorical tradition, see Nancy Struever, *The Language of History in the Renaissance* (Princeton, 1970), 79-81.

Despite this lack of specific advice on how to go about a critical approach to the sources, Petrarch did praise the historian's critical faculty, and condemned those historians who lacked that quality of discernment and selectivity. Instead of trying to include all known details in their accounts and thus producing a history "lost in cloudy ambiguities and inexplicable conflicts," the historian should sift and rework the material provided by earlier historians. Hence, the critical historian's object was not to repeat the words of other authorities, but to give an accurate verbal account of the events themselves. History for Petrarch had become a conceptual discipline which employed words to describe things; it did not consist of words that were merely about other words. As a result, the prefaces promised to provide new versions of a number of events, based on a discerning and critical reading of many sources.

Newness was not to be viewed as error. Petrarch attempted to disarm possible critics of the novelties he would introduce by warning them that new details were the product of long and critical research in the authorities. Only in this way were more accurate and sometimes unexpected accounts arrived at. An entire paragraph in the first preface is dedicated to making the ignorant reader aware of Petrarch's novel methods in historical criticism and to render him receptive to its unexpected fruits in the *De viris*. More generally, Petrarch concluded each preface with a statement of his intentions and with a fairly conventional plea for the reader's favorable reception of the work. In this final paragraph, he implicitly returned to all three goals of history: the critical, the moral, and the aesthetic. Petrarch asked the reader to accept his selection of material, since it represented the most truthful account that his critical faculties permitted. He went on to state that he would be very happy if the reader would learn something from the lives, so that his own life would be improved. Finally, eloquence in style is viewed as an additional benefit that might bring pleasure to a reader, although such pleasure is not central to the goal of history.

By the end of his life, Petrarch returned to the study of history in order to provide examples of leadership for his Carrara patron. He turned to investigate a distant past that was nonetheless of contemporary relevance, and, to a lesser extent, he sought the occasion to practice a dignified Latin prose style. Petrarch's aims thus correspond well with the themes of Renaissance historiography recently stated by Felix Gilbert: that history teaches by example, that there is a human nature common to all mankind, that the achievements of antiquity are immediately relevant to contemporary leaders, and that Greco-Roman antiquity saw the greatest society known to man.[15] For these reasons Petrarch stands as the first historian of the Renaissance.

But he was more than this. Petrarch's affection for the study of the past led him to hope for improvement in the future. There is a constancy in his personality and values; his desire for excellence among his contemporaries and his hope for glorious achievement in his own times infused his views on history as much as they did his informal advice and moral philosophy. As an historian as in so many of his other roles, Petrarch sought to use his life of study and scholarship to improve the lot of his fellow men.

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15. Felix Gilbert, "The Renaissance Interest in History" in *Art, Science, and History in the Renaissance*, ed. C. S. Singleton (Baltimore, 1967), 373-387.

THE LONG PREFACE TO *DE VIRIS ILLUSTRIBUS* (1351-1353)

I should naturally call very fortunate those scholars who wrote at a time when some honor was accorded such fine endeavors. Now I judge fortunate those who are even permitted to strive for such an honor without penalty. So many enemies of excellence meet you wherever you turn that to seem to love excellence is not without danger; and whoever would turn away from the path travelled by the insane mob will be subject either to harm or to reproach. There are two roads open to men, either of greediness or pleasure, and both full of peril. And to move from these two even a little is held to be a hateful and ridiculous error, so that whoever abandons the beaten path that leads to death is seen as an utter fool or public enemy of the human race. There is another path, the most difficult but noble one, which leads to glory; it has always been travelled by a few and is now travelled by practically no one. Hence, not only Venus, but also Juno wins the palm of judgement for their endeavors; Minerva alone is neglected.[1] What indeed can we do now, if it is dangerous to love excellence and to admire one's friends? And what use will it be to speak of these things, if the evil and cowardly despise the mention of the good and illustrious, if almost all the glory of others is subjected to their slander? Therefore, should we be silent? No, rather, it is proper to speak, for the very reason that through the remembrance of virtue we censure vice.

I have decided, therefore, to collect or rather almost to compress into one place the praise of the illustrious men who flourished with outstanding glory and whose memory — which I found spread far and wide and scattered in sundry volumes — has been handed to us through the skill of many learned men.[2] I confess that I should prefer to write on things seen rather than read, contemporary rather than ancient, so that posterity would receive from me information about this age just as I have received from the ancients information about the distant past. However, being tired and desirous of rest, I thank those contemporary princes who free me from this labor, for they contribute material not for history but for satire. And though I realize that some of them

1. Venus represents the way of pleasure and Juno the way of the practical arts; only Minerva representing the theoretical arts is excluded. This concept of personification of the three kinds of human activity was derived from the story of the judgment of Paris as contained in Fulgentius, *Mythologiae* 2.1, which Petrarch definitely had in his library; cf. De Nolhac, *Pétrarque*, I, 169-171.

2. This notion is present in Giovanni Colonna's preface to his *De viris illustribus* (cf. Braxton Ross, "Giovanni Colonna, Historian at Avignon," *Speculum* 45 [1970], 544, fn. 43). Its ancient source is Valerius Maximus, *Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri IX*, praefatio: "The deeds and memorable words which describe the annals of Rome and of foreign nations have been scattered widely in many other works, so I have decided to make a selection of these deeds and words from the most outstanding authors in order save those who want to know these things from the long labor of their own research."

have recently become famous because of military victories, these occurred because of good fortune or the inertia of the enemy, so that the success was not at all a question of military valor or true glory.

Just as it is glorious to invent new things in philophical or poetic works, so it is forbidden to do so in history. And since it is my purpose not to compose a story but to retell history, therefore it is proper for me to follow in the footsteps of many famous authors — not, however, to transcribe their words but to describe the events themselves. It does not escape me how much work is involved in maintaining the dignity of my discourse. Since it is not permitted to me to make use of the very words of earlier historians and since it is not possible for me to surpass them in style, there is only a third course open to me. Let everyone be aware of the volume and order of the many disparate facts and if I have done my task well let him be grateful to me; if I have done it with some elegance, let him be very grateful. Also the reader should realize that as I have taken upon myself the task of collecting the facts, so I have relieved him of the burden of research. For although the things I am going to write about are found in other authors, they are not, however, found collected there in the same way. For what is lacking in one author I have supplied from another. One account I have made shorter, another clearer; there were still others whose brevity made them obscure, so I have expanded these and thus made them more lucid. I have also omitted many things which I know are found in other historians who treated of the ancients' customs and absurd religious practices (I should say superstitions); for these things would have been more tedious than useful and pleasant. I have joined together many things which were found dispersed in many histories, by one author or by several, and I have made them a whole.

In doing this I have thought that I have been able to avoid the imprudence and sterile diligence of those authors who, having collected the words of all the historians — so that they seem to have not neglected anything at all — have really contradicted one authority with another so the entire text of their history is lost in cloudy ambiguities and inexplicable conflicts. I am neither the peacemaker among conflicting historians nor the collector of every minute fact; but rather, I am the copier of those whose verisimilitude or greater authority demands that they be given greater credence. Therefore, if there are any future readers who are well-versed in history and who will have met one or another anecdote which they have not been accustomed to hear or read, I beseech and even admonish them not to pronounce judgement hastily (which is the habit of those who know only a little), but rather to reflect upon the disagreements of historians, who in many cases caused embarrassment even to Livy, who was so much closer to the events he was describing. For there are some men, especially soldiers, who, because they are very busy, select in time of leisure only one history book and, to distract themselves from their

worries, take refuge in the pleasure of reading it at some time during the day or night. And thus they are so impressed by reading this one book that anything they hear which is not in it seems to them to be not just new, but even erroneous. Hence, they immediately proclaim as false anything which is told in a way that differs from how they had found it written in their one book. They consider themselves learned because they have read only one book, while if they had read many (as it is possible to do), they would have realized that they were quite ignorant. So they do not think that what is lacking in their author can be found, as it can, in others, or that what is told in the other authors in a different way can really be believed.

Now, if anyone who really wants to know all of history will say that I have left out entirely too much and have neglected the law of history which as I know was recorded by Cicero,[3] I will defend myself by calling attention to my diligence and to the infinite quantity of events. Since it is virtually impossible to satisfy the curiosity to know everything, I have instead taken the position that I shall treat only those things which acquire splendor in the treatment. Hence, I shall observe the rule I have read in Horace's *Ars Poetica*.[4] For who, I ask, would want to set down, in order, from the most distant past, the names of the kings of the Parthians or Macedonians, of the Goths and Huns and Vandals and other peoples which have always been obscure and that now are obliterated by time? And even if I were to try to do this, would I not seem to have forgotten my own purpose, because of the immensity of the work and the boredom for the reader, not to mention the labor and loss of time involved for me? Besides, not every rich and powerful person is similarly distinguished; these are the result of good luck, while the illustrious ones are the product of glory and virtue. In any case, I have not promised to describe lucky men, but illustrious ones. I recall an anecdote about Caesar Augustus who, when he was at Alexandria where the ashes of the kings of Egypt were preserved in precious tombs, gladly contemplated the body of Alexander of Macedon, which lay in the chamber. But when Augustus was asked if he wanted to inspect the remains of Ptolemy, he replied, "I want to see kings, not just corpses."[5] Even though he knew that Ptolemy had been a king, the wise emperor wanted to suggest

3. Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.15.62: "For who does not know history's first law to be that an author must not dare to tell anything but the truth, and its second that he must dare to tell the whole truth."

4. Horace, *Ars poetica*, 149-150: "He throws the auditor into the midst of things, as if they were well-known, and those events which he despairs of treating brilliantly, he leaves out."

5. Petrarch closely paraphrased the account in Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*, 18: "About this time he had the sarcophagus and body of Alexander the Great brought forth from its shrine, and after gazing on it, showed his respect by placing upon it a golden crown and strewing it with flowers; and being then asked whether he wished to see the tomb of the Ptolemies as well, he replied, 'My wish was to see a king, not corpses!' "

by this brief remark that there is a great difference between true kings and those who are commonly given the name of kings.

I have promised, I repeat, to describe those men whom we call illustrious and who are remembered the most by their magnificent and illustrious deeds, although in fact some of these men are relatively unknown. For if we required that each one be absolutely illustrious we would have made a very slender volume or even perhaps none at all. For who can be found who is illustrious in every way? It is a well-known fact that, as with many handsome faces, the most illustrious minds are often afflicted by nature with some grave defect. In a work of this size, I have expended long and painstaking labor in order that I might be both useful and pleasing. I have omitted many things which, as I said above, seemed to lend more to confusion than to usefulness, while I have striven at the same time for brevity and a description of the really important events. For what use is it, to give some examples, to know what slaves or dogs an illustrious man has had, what beasts of burden, what cloaks, what were the names of his servants, what was the nature of his married life, his profession, or his personal property? What use is it to know what sort of food he liked best, or what he preferred as a means of transportation, as a breastplate, as a cloak, or finally, even for sauces and vegetables?[6]

Whoever desires to know these and similar things, let him consult other historians who propose to write a great deal, rather than just on important or glorious subjects. In my book, he will look for these things in vain, except inasmuch as they can lead to virtues or to the contraries of virtues. For, unless I am mistaken, this is the profitable goal for the historian: to point up to the readers those things that are to be followed and those to be avoided, with plenty of distinguished examples provided on either side.[7] Whatever author would presume to wander outside this boundary, let him know that he is treading on foreign soil and wandering in foreign territory, and let him be reminded to return to the beaten path, except perhaps when he will be seeking, at a certain point, to please the readers with amusing anecdotes. For I myself

6. Petrarch doubtless had in mind the famous ancient example of this mania for insignificant detail as recorded in *Scriptores Historiae Augustae,* Opellius Macrinus, 1.3-5: "Junius Cordus, indeed, was fond of publishing the lives of those emperors whom he considered the more obscure. He did not, however, accomplish much; for he found but little information and that not worth noting. He openly declared that he would search out the most trivial details, as though, in dealing with a Trajan, a Pius, or a Marcus, it should be known how often he went walking, when he varied his diet, and when he changed his clothes, whom he advanced in public life and at what time."

7. Livy, *Ab urbe condita libri,* praefatio 10: "What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this, that you behold the lessons of every kind of example set forth as a conspicuous monument. From those you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these make for the avoidance of what is shameful in the conception and shameful in the result."

cannot deny that I have often abandoned myself for long periods to such digressions, when it was pleasing for me to remember or to recall to others the manners and domestic life of illustrious men, their conversations, their pithy sayings and turns of phrases, their words, sometimes stinging, sometimes grave, which they dropped here and there and all of which seemed to me to be always diverting and sometimes even useful. And I have added reports on their bodily stature, genealogy, and manner of death when it seemed to be pleasing to know these things.

If I have succeeded in accomplishing less than I had intended, I hope that whoever reads this book will please excuse me. For while I make you judge of my success, I wish that you believe what I say concerning my intentions. And if it will seem to you, therefore, that there is too much of some material and less than you would like concerning other things, ascribe it either to a lack of genius or to a mind which has been distracted by worry, and say among yourselves: "This man would have liked to be more outstanding, more useful, more pleasing, but he was not able." If, on the other hand, the labor of my studies has perhaps at least in part quenched the thirst of your expectations, then I ask from you no other kind of reward than that I be loved by you, even though I am not known by you, even though I am shut up in my grave, even though I have turned into dust. In this same way, I have loved after a thousand years many who have helped me in my studies who were not just dead but consumed after so much time. But I realize I protest too much and so that I do not seem to be too preoccupied with meriting your good judgment, I shall not drag on longer. Nor shall I expend on this little preface the time (and let us hope that will be granted to us) which is due only to necessities. Therefore, with him whom we call the father of the human race, I begin my very long journey.

THE SHORT PREFACE (1371-1374)

At your request, noble Carrara lord, who wields the scepter solely and with very moderate force over the great city of Padua, I have decided to collect or rather almost to compress into one place, certain illustrious men who flourished in outstanding glory and whose memory has been handed down to us in diverse and widely scattered volumes through the skill of many learned men. Therefore, it is proper to follow in the footsteps of many famous authors; not, however, to transcribe their words but to describe the events themselves. Nor does it escape me how much work is involved in maintaining the dignity of my discourse. Since it is not permitted to me to make use of the very words of earlier historians and since it is not possible for me to surpass them in style, there is only a third course open to me. Let everyone be aware of the problems

I have faced with the ordering and great mass of material. For although those things that I am going to write about are found in other authors, they were not, however, found in those authors in the order I present here. For what was lacking in one author I have supplied from another; there were still others whose brevity made them unclear so that I had to make them more lucid. Finally, there were those authors whose sentences were dispersed in other sources and these I have joined together and from the disparate sentences made a whole.

In doing this I have thought that I have been able to avoid the imprudence and sterile diligence of those authors who, having collected the words of all the historians so that they seem to have not neglected anything at all, have really contradicted one authority with another, so the entire text of their history is lost in cloudy ambiguities and inexplicable conflicts. I am neither the peacemaker among conflicting historians nor the collector of every minute fact, but rather I am the copier of those whose verisimilitude or greater authority demands that they be given greated credence. Therefore, if there are any future readers who are well-versed in history and who will have met one or another anecdote which they have not been accustomed to hear or read, I beseech and even admonish them not to pronounce judgment hastily (which is the habit of those who know only a little), but rather to reflect upon the disagreements of historians, who in many cases caused embarrassment even to Livy, who was so much closer to the events he was describing. It is proposed to keep to brevity and to clarity since a mass of things leads, as I have said above, to confusion rather than to usefulness. In my book, nothing is found except what leads to virtues or to the contraries of virtues. For, unless I am mistaken, this is the profitable goal for the historian: to point up to the readers those things that are to be followed and those to be avoided. Whoever would presume to wander outside this boundary, let him know that he is wandering on foreign territory and let him be reminded to return to the path, except perhaps when he will be seeking to please his readers with amusing anecdotes. And I myself cannot deny that I have often for long periods abandoned myself to such distracting digressions, when it was pleasant to call to mind the manner and domestic life of illustrious men, their stinging and grave words, their bodily stature, genealogy, or manner of death.

If I have accomplished less than I intended, I hope that whoever reads this book will please excuse me. For while I make you judge of my success, I wish that you believe what I say concerning my intentions. Now if it will seem to you that there is too much of some material and less than you would like concerning other things, ascribe it either to a lack of genius or to a mind which has been distracted by worry. If, on the other hand, the labor of my studies has perhaps at least in part quenched the thirst of your expectations, then I ask from you no other kind of reward than that I be loved by you, even

though I am unknown to you, even though I am shut up in my grave, even though I have turned into dust. In this same way, I have loved after a thousand years many who have helped me in my studies, who were not just dead but consumed after so much time. But I realize I protest too much and so I do not seem to be too preoccupied with meriting your good judgment, I shall not drag on longer. Nor do I wish to expend in this little preface the time which I ought to give to these *Lives*. From this preface, therefore, I am ready to turn my pen to that which you have requested, namely to Romulus, founder of the city of Rome. Since I am thus impelled by your wishes and desires, I undertake the awaiting voyage.